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Hello and welcome to Origin Stories, a podcast by the Immigration Policy Lab that explores migration through research and storytelling. I'm Adam Lichtenheld, IPL's executive director. Across the world, migration has become one of the most contentious political and policy challenges of our time. With branches at Stanford University and ETH Zurich in Switzerland, the Immigration Policy Lab generates rigorous evidence and innovative solutions to help policymakers make more informed decisions on immigration.

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We also try to highlight the human stories behind the data. Our guests in this episode are Sheba and Samira. Sheba is the founder and Executive Director at Tech for Change. Samira is Director of Campaign and Field Insights in Global Public Affairs at Microsoft. Sheba graduated from Stanford in 2002 and Samira in 2003.

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We'll let them take it away.

Hi, Sheba. I'm so glad we're having this opportunity to reconnect. And I was reflecting back on our time at college, and I realized I never really asked you about your story or where your parents are from. So I'd love to hear a little bit more.

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Where are your parents, families from?

Hi, Samira. Likewise, it's so great that we're finally having this conversation, what, 20 some years later. But, yeah, it's interesting. We both lived in the same dorm and we never really talked about our family's histories. My parents were born in pre-partition India, so British India.

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And separately, because they were children at the time, they migrated with their families to Pakistan. My dad was a young, I think early teenager and had lost his parents, and he and his siblings and grandmother migrated to Karachi in Pakistan. And on his side after studying and working, he would work during the day so as to support the family and then go to school at night.

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And one day he saw in the newspaper an ad for a Scandinavian seminar, a scholarship to this unheard land of Denmark at the time. And this was in the 50s, or maybe it was 60s. And so he applied for that scholarship and got it and moved to Denmark and then from there moved to London, to England.

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And I'll pause there and tell you my mom's side of the story. And on my mother's side, she was a little girl when the partition happened, which was a very, as you know the history of the Indian subcontinent, really, really significant and challenging event. And a few years after Partition, her family moved to what is modern day Bangladesh, but at the time it was East Pakistan.

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And she grew up in East Pakistan, so she speaks Bengali and Urdu along with English. But then they migrated, ultimately she and my dad when my dad was in London, they had an arranged marriage. The way it transpired was that, my dad's older brother and my mom's older sister had an arranged marriage.

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And by arranged marriage, I mean that they saw each other for the first night on their wedding night. In the meantime, my dad was in London at this point. He had just left Denmark and moved to England. And my uncle asked him to come and marry his wife's younger sister.

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So again, this pair also had an arranged marriage where they saw each other for the first time on their wedding night. And my mom, after marriage, moved to London. So, so then they lived in London. My dad was there for 16 years, but my mom was there when they got married for 10 years.

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So it was really through a lot of making one's own path in life, and especially my father kind of doing that changed the rest of our stories, very, very much. Because when they had migrated from India to Pakistan, they'd left behind everything that they had. My dad's grandfather used to have orchards and all of that was left behind.

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So they came to Pakistan completely penniless and again without his parents, so orphans. And just through going to Denmark and on his own and always being optimistic and positive and creating charging ahead this new course. They all managed to get to London, that's where all my older siblings were born.

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So I'm the youngest and I call these double cousins of mine siblings because you can see how the family's two brothers married, two sisters. They were all really close and so they all grew up in the same house in London. And then actually my family moved to Malawi, to Africa, where they lived for three years.

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My dad had a sense of adventure and Malawi had just gotten independence from the British. And so they were looking to build up their industry and trade. And so they were calling for expatriates to come on three year contracts and work there. And that was a really fantastic experience from what I can tell for my siblings and my parents.

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And then when my mom was pregnant with me, they moved to Pakistan. And that's where I was born, I was born in Karachi. And the other half of the family also moved to Pakistan. And the rest of our lives were in Pakistan until it was time for everybody to go to college.

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And one by one, all of the older siblings, they got scholarships to various places in colleges in the United States, including Stanford. My oldest male cousin was the first to get a scholarship to Stanford and come here and that's really the reason why we had heard of Stanford.

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And I don't know how he just randomly heard of it because one of his classmates was applying there and he got in. So that was sort of the experience. And in terms of where my parents would say they're from, they're from Patna in Bihar in India, which is, that's where they grew up.

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And Patna is a populous city but not a very developed city. And I have been back there, I've been lucky enough to go back there. So yeah, the experience of growing up in Karachi was interesting. It's a city of 20 million people, so a lot of people. But very tumultuous times, in the 80s there was rivalry between two political parties and so people would always get caught in the crossfires.

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Literally I remember going to take my GCSE O leveling exams which are with the University of Cambridge, which are held all over the world at the same time. And those exams do not get rescheduled for any reason whatsoever. And so I remember going to take those exams while there was a curfew and my father was driving and he would tell me to duck underneath the car seat because there were gunshots on either side.

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So there was that aspect of it which was this political instability and just kind of lack of safety and security. But on the other hand, I would say the notion of friendship is very different. And I know, I'm sure you can relate to this too, Samira, but there's something about the way this society is structured in a very communal way.

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Like relationships are just, you instantly form bonds. There's not any formality between people. There's no notion of like space even for better or for worse. And people are always helping each other out and asking each other for help. And it's a very, very people oriented culture. And friends, you make individual friends very easily and rely on them for a lot of things.

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And that is different from the culture I experienced in the United States, which was very different. But also at the same time there are things at every traffic light you stop at, there are children who are. Are begging for alms and poverty is very apparent, and so there's a lot of pain there too.

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Those were some of my experiences growing up. Samira, how was your experience? I think it was a little bit different, but tell me about your parents, families, where are they from and where did you grow up?

Yeah, happy to get into that, Sheba, just one quick follow up question for you and thank you for taking me through that journey.

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Did you have a lot of experience when you were growing up, I guess between the US and Pakistan and between Europe and Pakistan, and how was that sort of contrast for you? Just wanna see the world a bit more through the eyes of Sheba as a young girl and experiencing that contrast.

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So I had visited India when I was, I think I was in the seventh grade and we had a relative in the Maldives. And so I'd visited the Maldives and those are the two places I recall being outside of the country. And we traveled within Pakistan, in the north of Pakistan, it's very, very beautiful.

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Lush mountains and waterfalls and things like that, and I remember that. And then my brother was in college in the United States coz my siblings are all a lot older than I am. So my mom and I came to visit when I was nine years old. And I just remember all the Chips Ahoy cookies that I ate.

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It was also Christmas time and Santa Claus and all this, and I had my cousins here whom I visited, I just ate a lot. I know that I loved all this candy and food and presents, but I remember we celebrated Christmas with my cousin's partner's family at the time.

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And they gave us so many, they were so, so generous and so kind and they gave us so many presents. And one of the presents I got was an electrical pencil sharpener. You put the pencil in there and it sharpens it for you, and I was just blown away, I'd never seen anything like that.

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And yeah, just the things that existed to make life easier through advancements in technology. We didn't have any of those kinds of things. And then even I'd never seen snow before in my life, and all of that was earmuffs. My gosh, I remember thinking they were so cool like those things.

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But I'll tell you that, so I hadn't traveled. There weren't that many travel abroad experiences before I came to college. And as a child I had first studied in my aunt's school in Pakistan, which was a co-educational school. And then I went to an all girl Catholic convent which was a huge leap, that felt like a big cultural difference.

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Cultural leap because everybody spoke in English there. These were girls who, I don't know if it's necessarily more affluent or not, but they had just grown up speaking English and being a little bit more westernized. They would wear skirts, our uniforms were these dresses and skirts and we had nuns who kept us very, very disciplined.

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But that was a fantastic experience actually, I grew so much there and learned a lot. And then finally after my O-levels I went to another school, my A-levels, which was the last two years of high school. We have 13 years of schooling and that was a co-ed school, which was another cultural difference, that was definitely an elite school.

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Those of us who came in from the outside were extremely nerdy. We had done well in the O-level exams and we were extremely respectful of our teachers, very disciplined studied hard, etc. But the kids in that school, as they had grown up, they had bullies and they weren't as respectful of their teachers and stuff, so even that was a shock.

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So I feel like there were a number of cultural shocks within Pakistan before I came to the US.

Yeah, I can certainly relate to some of those experiences in terms of transitions and the subcultures that are present even within one supposedly more uniform culture. So just to take you through, Sheba my journey as well.

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My family is from South Asia at large. My mom is from Punjab in India and my dad is from Punjab in Pakistan. So they share a similarity in the sense that, before partition, Punjab was one. So there are a lot of cultural similarities and you're probably familiar, but there are still people today from Punjab and India who frequently go to Punjab in Pakistan to visit certain historical and religious sites and vice versa.

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I know Muslims have a number of Sufi shrines that are also important to Sikhs. And my mom's from a Sikh background and my dad's from a Muslim background. So I always thought it was interesting growing up that although they come from two different countries, they could speak the same language more or less to one another.

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And they shared a lot of cultural similarities, despite having very different, I would say, religious backgrounds and despite the fact that I was raised primarily Muslim and through the lens of being Pakistani. So although I did have experience interacting with my cousins in India and. My identity is very much tied to being a Pakistani, person of Muslim origins.

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But, in terms of my parents, they also shared the immigrant story, the very sort of quintessential immigrant story, this desire to do better. And for my mom, it very much came from her family. She had an aunt who raised her starting, I think, when she was very young, because there wasn't good schooling in the village in which she was born.

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And her aunt really instilled in her this desire to be ambitious, to really use her strengths to continue to achieve. There was pressure to be a doctor. She didn't end up becoming a doctor, but she did do really well in school and have good marks. So another uncle of hers, who was the brother of her mom and the brother of this aunt, recognized her potential and said, she can do so much better if she goes abroad.

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So he took my mom to Malaysia, and they lived there for a bit, and then he moved to the US and took my mom as well. And she continued higher education in Idaho. I think she was one of seven or eight South Asian people at the university or something like that.

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And she got her master's in economics. And then on my dad's side, it was very much from within my dad wanted to explore, he wanted to see the world, he was born in Chang, which is a small town in Punjab. I mean, it's a moderately sized town now, it's grown quite a bit.

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He eventually landed in Lahore for university, and he loves to write. That's something he and I share, journalism stories, etc. But in order to carve his path to go abroad, he actually applied for an MBA and came to the US to get an MBA because that was going to be the better path to getting a job.

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So both my mom and my dad carved their way individually to the US and landed at the same university. And at that university, as I mentioned, there were very few South Asian people, and so they tended to hang out with each other, even though they were coming from different parts of India or different parts of Pakistan.

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They had a love story, basically. They became friends and fell in love and really helped each other out on their journey as new immigrants. Whether it was in university or the types of jobs they were doing, each of them had side jobs actually to help support themselves through college or university, rather.

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And both of them sort of delivered newspapers. So, in the process they became increasingly close. And it was, I think at first quite apparent that due to cultural differences, it would be very difficult for them to get married. Typically, Sikhs and Muslims don't marry, and if you're going to marry into Muslim family, you're expected to convert.

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So, I don't think there was this idea of marriage on the table. But then when my mom remained in Idaho and my dad moved to Chicago after studying to get a job, they realized they wanted to take it sort of to the next level. And my mom converted, she changed her name, and they both sought the permission of their respective families and got married.

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So, I think that story is a very powerful part of my background in the sense that I tend to want to take a we mentality to any sort of obstacle that I'm facing. I really, really value this idea of having deeper intimacy with one person who can serve as a long-term partner in some way.

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And it's something that I've sort of sought, and so, their respective stories really resonate with me. And I think in the back of my mind, although I was raised Muslim and I was expected to marry someone Muslim and represent sort of a good Muslim, I think, for whatever that means.

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I think in the back of my mind, I've always been curious about how people from different cultures come together. They told me about the love letters that they wrote to one another, letters rather, by post. And it was all just so beautiful to me that two people coming from different cultures technically, shared so much in common and met in a new time and in a new space and were able to form something new, which is a family.

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And I'm one product of that, and I have a younger sister who's a few years younger than me as well. So, that's kind of their story. And in terms of myself, so, I was born and raised in the US, I was born outside of Chicago, so very much lived a suburban life primarily in a Caucasian neighborhood.

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So, it was growing up with two different spheres because my parents were of South Asian background and there weren't that many South Asian families around. Just like the microcosm in their university, they tended to hang out over the weekends with other Indians and Pakistanis who were fairly educated.

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This was in the sort of early 80s and they had come in the 70s. And so, they shared this sort of drive, this desire to better position their children, position them better than themselves, this focus on education, and basically, this desire to rise in the middle class in the US.

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So, I remember having a lot of positive influences of other South Asian Americans around me, going to excellent universities, wanting to do really well. And there was just a lot of pressure to become a doctor or go to a great university. It was a positive force because it gave me something to look forward to, and it was a framework.

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At the same rate, there were obviously certain pressures in the sense that, it wasn't acceptable to become a musician or a dancer or things like that. And I remember I was much more interested in poetry and the arts, but I felt this need to, above all, academically excel.

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So, that was sort of the microcosm I was operating in. And these interactions I spoke about with other families in the area were mostly on the weekends, in school I was very much in a very Caucasian school. Backgrounds were typically German, Polish, a bit of Dutch. So, people whose parents or grandparents had come from Europe or great grandparents.

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And so, I often felt I was operating in two different spheres. I was getting a taste of my South Asian background and heritage over the weekends. But during the week, it was very much my trying to make sure that I'm properly fitting into a certain mold. I was very active in student government, and it was very important for me to carve out my own space and be well liked by my peers.

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So, I did find myself dancing around some of my Muslim background, like, whether it's my celebrating Eid or I never celebrated Christmas while growing up. We had no lights outside of our house. So, I found myself having to sort of navigate all that, dance around that and accept that, yet still try to appear or establish myself as a sort of likable, young leader, second, third grader, fourth grader, what have you.

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And I remember, my dad was very particular about our identity. He was very open about the fact that we didn't celebrate Christmas, and he wanted me to really embrace it. We weren't a very religious family. I was raised with some religious training, and I was very, very into that because I felt it grounded me in a certain way to learn about my religion, to practice it, but it wasn't shared by my whole family.

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For him, it was more about being proud of your identity. And I'd say in school, one of the things that really struck me is I remember that the few Asians that were in school, were actually some of the best performing students. So, I immediately started to associate sort of Asians with expectations of high performance at a very young age, and I think that continued to play out in my sort of work life as well.

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But that was Illinois, and then we moved over to California and it was very similar. I lived in primarily sort of very Caucasian neighborhoods, smaller towns, and it was beautiful to be in California, it was like an adventure. I remember thinking of sort of the Oregon Trail and what have you, because my family drove from the Midwest to California.

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But what we lost in the process was this second sphere, the microcosm I discussed on the weekends, because we had to re establish ourselves and make new friends. And we didn't really make very many. So, I remember feeling much more isolated although I loved California until high school when I moved to Pakistan.

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And so, when I moved to Pakistan, I moved back to Lahore. And speaking of going back and whatnot, we were going back regularly to Pakistan and to India as well. And the experience I had there was, it was very comfortable, upper middle class, etc. But Sheba, as you mentioned, there was poverty on the streets, the amount of sort of pollution, dust, etc.

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And the stark contrast, I can, to this day, I can't get it out of my mind that there are such different worlds that people live in just by virtue of where they're born. So, I've carried that with me, even in my work today. But just, it was different to visit and different to live there.

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When I visited, I think I had a chance to appreciate a little bit about my family and how they were living over there. And again, this stark contrast that I mentioned. But when I lived there, I was entering a different. Different sphere, which is when I realized this notion of subcultures, as you mentioned.

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And I think that's when I started to form as a young teen my ideas around power and how the perception of beauty influences power, money influences power, and race and culture. Just thinking back upon my life in America, how that influences power. I was at a school which was an American school.

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Most of the families were extremely wealthy. They were industrialists in Lahore, owned land. It seemed very futile even in modern days. And they wanted to send their children abroad. So I saw how by virtue of even the family you're born into, let alone the place, there can be stark power differences.

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On the more positive side, I really, really grew to appreciate the arts in Pakistan, like the fashion scene, painters and paintings and just the social life. And I saw a different side of Pakistan by living there and being immersed and embedded. But I will say joining high school and being like 14 and having to get re-acclimated was tough.

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I think it made me quieter in some ways. At the same rate, I was a couple weeks in, running for office, doing a fashion show there and just really trying to fit in while retaining my sort of American identity. And the students around me, however, were a little bit unforgiving.

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If there was anything a bit too American, I remember there would be comments. And because I was doing this fashion show and running for office, I saw some expletives plastered on the wall about me and there was very little I could do about it. So I really got a taste of sort of the power dynamics and how much power some families hold in Pakistan and how they view American culture and American women.

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And I started to reshape my identity. And I think I was really trying to be the best of both worlds. And it was just a lot of pressure. So I've shared so much with you, Sheba. I'm gonna stop there and just flip over more to our college experience because I thought we could go more into how we met and what our life was like when we sort of met at Stanford.

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Thanks for sharing that, Samira. That was super interesting. I feel like in some ways, yeah, there's obviously lots of similarities, but also in some ways lots of differences and how we all came together and had. Were put in an environment at Stanford that was how we actually met and how that played out.

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How much of that has to do with our past experiences. And so you and I met. I was a transfer student to Stanford. I had first gone to Hamilton College in upstate New York for a year and a half. And I had arrived in January of 1998 at Hamilton, where there was a ton of snow and I didn't even own a jacket, like a down jacket or anything like that.

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And Hamilton was a big cultural difference because it was a lot smaller. It's in the village of Clinton, which has a population of 4000, of which 1800 are Hamilton students. It was very much sort of like homogenous in the sense of being folks from rich suburbia and Caucasian.

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And there was very little diversity. I didn't drink, I had grown up Muslim in Pakistan and so drinking was a big part of the culture. The frat scene was the main social scene. And I was in a quad with three other women with whom I had actually nothing in common.

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I remember one of them had asked me if we rode on elephants in Pakistan, which was kind of funny now that I look back at it. But yeah, that was a big, big difference. But the academics were really good at Hamilton and it was on the semester system as opposed to the quarter system.

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So I could really take my time and get a lot of one-on-one attention from professors. And I'd started out as a math major. And Samira, I know that that overlaps a little bit with your world too, at Stanford we'll talk about that. But the reason why it started out as a math major, I loved math in school.

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In high school I did really well. And there's a little bit that I skipped over, which is that I was in medical school for one semester in Pakistan, which is why I came a semester late to the United States. As you mentioned, the expectation was my parents really wanted me to be a doctor because there's still this hierarchy of jobs and professions that you can have.

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And being a doctor is top of the list, followed by being an engineer, etc. And so I had gotten into the top medical school in the country and a lot of my classmates were going there. But I had this deep burning sense of adventure, similar to, I think I got it from my dad and similar to it sounds like your dad as well.

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And so I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my older siblings who had all gotten scholarships and come to the US, so I left medical school and I came to the US after a semester. And at Hamilton, math was great, but at some point math starts to get really abstract and I realized that the stuff that I loved, which was calculus and that sort of thing, like the higher up you go you get into group theory and field theory and things are just more abstract and I wasn't as excited about that.

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So then I decided to minor in computer science, not because I was interested in computer science, but because it felt like that's the next, that's the wave, becoming a computer science engineer is the next best thing I could do if I wasn't going to be a doctor. And then when I transferred to Stanford, my first major was mathematical and computational sciences, which I thought was a nice blend of math and computer science.

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But honestly, it was the driest and hardest parts of both of them. And so it wasn't for me. And in fact, what you studied, which I'm sure you'll talk about, one of those classes I so admire and respect, operations research, was in this program, and that I thought was the hardest class.

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So I realized that wasn't for me, and I was so fortunate and so lucky at Stanford to discover the special program that Stanford had called Symbolic Systems, which was computer science, philosophy, psychology and linguistics. And so you study the way human beings think and the way computer systems think.

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And the reason why I loved it so much was because it combined the humanities and the sciences. And that got my mental juices flowing. So my first year as a transfer was actually, it was the smallest transfer class in, I don't know, potentially history, because what had happened that year was that a lot of freshmen had accepted and so there were very few places to give out to transfer.

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So we were a small group, but I was placed in Toyon, which was a dorm that was all sophomores. And I didn't have the camaraderie that all of them had from their first year. And it was the quarter system, so things were really on a shorter timeline. And the caliber of everybody around me was just incredibly high.

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Like at Hamilton, I was fifth in my class, year of 400 and some students. And at Stanford, I felt like I was a complete imposter. Across the hall from me lived these guys who had published extensively, I don't know, a nature magazine or whatnot before coming to Stanford.

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One of my roommates was a pro sportswoman, headed for the Olympics and all of this kind of stuff. And so I really hadn't had in Pakistan growing up. We didn't have a lot of extracurricular opportunities. We did some theater and debate and those kinds. Kinds of things but yeah, the kinds of things that folks had done before coming to Stanford was amazing.

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And then the following year I was the transfer orientation coordinator and at the same time I had been accepted to be a resident writing tutor. Obviously I was on a work study plan as part of the scholarship and so I was a resident writing tutor at Arroyo where you Samira as a transfer student.

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So I'll hand it over to you to share now your part of that story.

Yeah in terms of just the party scene in college and how that hits one by surprise if they're not as exposed or experienced. I actually got a little exposed to a pretty heavy party scene in Lahore and it caused a lot of cognitive dissonance because I had grown up thinking that people in Pakistan don't do drugs, they don't drink, they don't date, they don't party.

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And girls specifically don't do particular things and that was the rationale my parents had given me for so many things that kept me a little bit more socially distanced from others. I remember it was as extreme as I had to wear pants during physical education in the US with scorching heat in California and everyone had questions about that and I couldn't go to dances and whatnot.

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And so when I got to Pakistan at the age of 15 or so, I had school dances at my American school. And I said there's, I would like to go like other Pakistani girls are going and they didn't really have much to say. But I will say because of the way I had grown up and because of sort of perception there of sort of good girls and bad girls and who's who and families, I was still much more reserved.

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But I do think that exposure gave me a little bit of a taste of what I might see in college. I was going in with a I'd say slightly more open eyes than I would have had I even gone from an American high school into an American college because of the way I was being raised in America.

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But in terms of making it to Stanford, Sheba my route was also circuitous, so I had applied to medical schools in Pakistan. I missed the and I'm not sure if this is the school you're referring to, but I missed the deadline for a very good private school in Karachi.

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And so I applied to some of the public schools and so then I got a merit based scholarship. There's two of them I think for foreigners in Lahore, for government colleges or there were two at the time to go to King Edward, which is one of the government colleges, a completely different environment than American University.

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And this was while I had already started at Cornell, which is upstate New York, very, very cold, but super beautiful campus with waterfalls and diverse and so that was my first taste of college. But when I heard that I got into KE just thinking I should be a do and it is the most well respected profession.

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I basically left Cornell and I joined KE and I was in Lahore living with my father. At the time my mother was in the US and it was so hard for me to adjust because I had gotten that taste of college. I had been on my own, granted, in a dorm just for a little bit, enough to feel a sense of freedom.

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And then I was back living with my dad and at a school environment that was very different, cold calling, just it was just hard for me to adjust to the pedagogy there. And it wasn't the actual, I would say, study of medicine. I remember loving anatomy and dissections and I always loved biology so I continued to study at Stanford.

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It was more about the sort of pedagogy and the way in which the teachers were approaching students not as partners but more as just with a heavier hand and in a much more sort of disciplined way. And I think I couldn't, I just couldn't adjust. So I had applied as a transfer to two schools that I had been waitlisted at as an as a senior and Stanford was one of them and I left KE actually before I got into Stanford.

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So I wrote my father a letter and I said I'm going to be moving back to California. I moved back to California, moved in with my mom, got sort of a job and took a few classes on the side until I, and I was just waiting to hear back from these transfer, transfer universities.

[00:36:38:422]

And it was a little bit of a risky situation, but I was thrilled when I got into both. There was a particular program at Penn and at Stanford and I'd always wanted to go to Stanford. So it was a really easy yes for me. And that's when, Sheba, you must have met me because I remember that you were in Arroyo and I joined Stanford as a transfer.

[00:37:02:332]

And I think that sort of circuitous route actually was very helpful in that it gave me a sense of validation in terms of what I wanted. So when I got to Stanford, I had experienced KE, I had experienced another university and the intuition that I had all along that I would like Stanford was actually validated like, I loved it, just as you said.

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She where there's so many super, super talented people around you, so it can be very intimidating. But the camaraderie and the energy and the vibrance, I mean, it's unparalleled, I think. I don't know if I've been able to recreate that experience, maybe in grad school when I was studying policy, but otherwise it's been really difficult to recreate that experience and just being able to learn from others.

[00:37:52:045]

At Stanford, I, I think in my heart I had always wanted to be. I don't think I know I had always wanted to be a writer and actress. I did drama when I was very young and did a lot of creative writing, but I just could never break free of that pressure to try to do pre med and then to do an engineering degree, management science and engineering as a backup.

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Which is very intense to have that as your backup plan and then on top of it to try and take classes I like. So it was really, I think that first year was really tough. I had to reset expectations and I remember going to my dad and saying look, I don't think I, I can do all this and I don't think I wanna do pre med.

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I think I want to do like biotech or something at the intersection of biology and business. And he said you've made it this far, you've gone through many different things now and I trust you, I trust you to choose something you like and do well. And it was a little too late for me to take that and run with it and go become a create writer, write a fiction novel, etc.

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But it was enough of a leeway where I felt like I could do management science and engineering and it was primarily the engineering core but then you got a chance to specialize in a focus area. So I chose tech and policy and that's where I really found a love and a passion for something that still exists today.

[00:39:16:698]

How will technology change society? How does policy create the guardrails to protect us from sort of certain harms to dictate and help sort of markets adapt to new technology. So it was a really interesting global interdisciplinary experience and I would say at Stanford, some of the things that stood out most to me and I loved most.

[00:39:41:889]

I mean, study abroad was amazing. So it was really great having been at Stanford for a while and being able to get away. I went to Oxford and I got the opportunity to do a tutorial, which is really that sort of one on one attention that you spoke of, Sheba, that you had at Hamilton and it was a complete.

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Completely different way of teaching. It's based on a lot of sort of questions, and deductive reasoning, and socratic method. And I would go on these long walks with my tutor and really unpackage my thinking and writing in a very intimate one on one setting. And we could go so much deeper.

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I remember taking a class on colonization. I remember taking a class on tech transfer. And it was different being, I think in a British landscape with some British professors. And I loved that sort of variety of teaching methods that I was able to experience by going abroad. And then also just a whole new culture.

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I also started college and wasn't drinking. And then I remember when I did study abroad, it was right about the time of my 21st birthday and I noticed these sort of beer and sort of the pop culture. So I became curious about what's what and I tried some beers for the first time, etc.

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So there was this desire in me to then immerse myself and kind of embrace that sort of cultural experience as well. And I could never really get rid of the travel bug after being raised in multiple countries. And having the experience I had in college, it just became this permanent wanderlust for me.

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And I think in terms of anything else, Shiva, I think Stanford just is so beautiful like today, still I can sort of picture the quad and night walks. I would take these night walks to the church when I felt sort of alone or missed home. And it was surprising to me that there were very few people out in the evening at night.

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And although the campus is so lit and so beautiful at night because as I mentioned, one of my parents was in Pakistan and they were very far away. So I just still remembered that Stanford was just such a beautiful, beautiful immersive experience in so many ways, being close to nature, and just the gorgeous campus and everything.

[00:42:07:600]

Sheba, I would love to hear just some of what you were involved in at Stanford and also some memories you have from just being on campus.

Yeah, and Sameera, it's so funny, I never knew that you went to medical school in Pakistan as well. You went to King Edward in Lahore and I went to Aachan Medical University in Karachi.

[00:42:27:014]

So that's so funny that we're learning these things about each other now after so many years. So at Hamilton College before I transferred to Stanford, because it was a semester system and things were just kind of slower paced. I was doing a number of things. I was the president of the International Students Association, and also the treasurer of the Asian Cultural Society and variety of other things.

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I held some talks and events, but I always felt that I stood out just because of being an immigrant, and because of being Brown, and because of being different, and it wasn't in a positive way. And that what I loved at Stanford first and foremost was just the diversity.

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It was so incredible. And even I'm just, obviously diversity of race and culture and immigrant backgrounds, but also diversity of experiences and diversity of thought. It was the opposite of homogenous, and that was really, really wonderful. And some of the things that I did at Stanford that I loved, even though I will confess that I felt a little bit more strapped for time.

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Because I was trying to finish up in two years and I had had a year and a half before, and then I switched majors partway through. So then I had to quickly try to do a bunch of makeup for that. And I spent far too much time in Sweet hall and Meyer Library than I should have.

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But what I remember that I loved making time for was there was a dance performance called Rhythms, a multicultural dance performance. And I emceed it in Dinkel Spiel Auditorium a couple of years, co-MCed it with a couple of other folks too. And it was just those kinds of things I'd always love.

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There's a part of my personality that's very much sort of enjoys addressing people, or debates, or giving talks, or just performing, I guess. And Rhythms gave me the opportunity to do that a couple of times, which was really fun for me. I loved a different type of kind of less of a performance, but Richard Powers class social dance.

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People used to camp out overnight to get into those classes, there'd be a line around the block. And I knew about it from my cousin, who had gone to Stanford a long, long time before me. And so I knew that no matter what I had to take social dance.

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And I took social dance one and two, but I loved the social dance classes. It was my first time doing partner dance, there was no such thing in Pakistan. You dance on your own at weddings, but you don't hold anybody else. And so that was really incredible, and I enjoy dancing.

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And so that was fun. The year that we met, I was a writing tutor at Arroyo, and both of those were things I loved. I loved being a writing tutor because writing is also something that I enjoy very much. And giving people feedback on their writing, and seeing them learning and improving, improve, that was really rewarding.

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But then also Arroyo was probably my most fun time, and that was in Wilbur. Our staff, the other the resident advisors, the public health educator, the resident computer consultant, like some of them are still my best friends to this day. It was just so, so, so special. And we spent a lot of time with our resident faculty, planning every week for the social activities that we would do or how to make things better for the dorm.

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And then for my program, Symbolic Systems in my final year, I was an advisor, a CMSIS advisor, which also I really enjoyed. And also, there was some prestige that came with it, and that was good. I enjoyed my communications thesis. So my advisor, because I was doing an honors thesis, was in the communications department, the late Cliff Nassau.

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And the stuff that he was researching was so fascinating. At this time, my focus was in human computer interaction. And these were still early days of user experience or of human computer interaction. And so we did these experiments. I ran some psychology type experiments, they were set up as two by twos and studying bias towards computer agents of certain race or of certain accents and things like that.

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Those things were just so fun. And then I did my master's at Stanford too. And as a grad student, I loved hanging out at Cafe Barone. That was really fun. One of my best friends to this day is somebody who was my co TA in a class for Cliff Nas.

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And the incredible people to your point Samira, about the friends and the kind of the bonds that were made. And I really enjoyed our time together at Arroyo as well. And I wanted to take it forward a little bit to maybe talking a little bit about, if you had one takeaway about how your understanding or thinking of yourself.

[00:48:01:026]

Self or your own identity shifted during your time at Stanford and then what, how has that led to what it is that you are doing now? I would love to hear that Sameera, if you have something to share about that.

Yeah, she read. I think Stanford was very much a period of self-discovery.

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It was the first time I had dedicated space outside of my parent's home to explore, to get to know myself and to solidify some of my values. So, what are the hard lines in terms of what I will and will not do? And do they even exist? Are there any hard lines or where am I drawing the source of my energy from?

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In terms of my moral compass, for lack of better words or my decision-making and what drives me? And I realized that I had always been service-oriented. Whether it's my family or soup kitchens in Sacramento or the sort of charity fashion show in Pakistan or what have you. But that is really the driving force and I want to continue to have a positive impact on people's lives and to really affect change amongst communities that are the hardest hit, that are disenfranchised, that do not have power because they do not have the rights, say racial affiliation, the right networks, the right sort of looks, enough money, all those things that had played a role in my life that I reflected upon very deeply.

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How do I bring it together and use what I have to trivialize it a bit, this sort of self discovery thing. The first thing I did when I got to Stanford, not the first thing, but one of the first things was wear very short skirts. So, although I didn't drink, I loved fashion and I loved short skirts and dresses and just the way they flowed and how pretty they made girls look.

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So, I really sort of experimented with my dress. In terms of food it was the first time I could take a very dedicated look at what I was eating and what's healthy and not healthy and kind of formulate my own opinions about diet. Otherwise, I was eating what was cooked in my home, which was typically South Asian food.

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Obviously not always, but typically was. And if it was not South Asian, maybe it was from the outside, et cetera, or it was very simple. So, my palate became more sort of nuanced in that way. And I remember I had my first bagel. People can't believe it. As a college student I had never, I think seen a bagel.

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And this is someone who had grown up in the US and lived in Pakistan, just had never had a bagel before. So things like this I was able to do and that's sort of a more trivialized version of it in terms of who I am, I think relationships.

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Although I knew I had to marry a Muslim person, inevitably, preferably a Pakistani, I allowed myself to at least hang out with guys a little bit differently, one one-on-one, go to Cafe Barone, go off campus, whatever, go to a dance. So that was definitely different. And I like you.

[00:51:03:525]

I was just struck by the diversity at Stanford. It's a big university, it's a large one. And I remember meeting my roommate for the first time who had a very different background from me. She had grown up in Bosnia, come to the U.S, sort of, I think in her teens, was also a transfer from a local college in California.

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And just being able to bond with her over Russian literature of all things, and remember how many ways we differed. I was fasting during Ramadan and she would sort of hear me crunching like an eating in the morning. And she still remembers it because it was such an experience for her to see someone wake up so early and eat and not eat for the rest of the day.

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And then I was very sort of friendly toward guys and would hang out with them. And she had a much more traditional view of what it meant to hang out with a guy and they should open the doors and always pay and all these little things that I was just learning from a very deep friendship with someone who came from a different cultural background, had different views and different thoughts and engaging in politics with people in the dorm, et cetera.

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So, I think this whole sort of journey of self discovery allowed me to develop my voice in a different way. So, one thing I did was I wrote a number of op-ed pieces and a couple of articles for the Stanford Daily. I wrote about the hijab legislation in France that was under consideration, about the Iraq war.

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I also looked at sort of the riots in Gujarat. And I remember I wrote sort of a story that involved me interviewing someone from a fraternity. So I kind of got to spread my wings and express myself and then see the reaction. When a Muslim person writes about something like this what happens next?

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What kind of questions you get? And Ayeshiva, as you probably recall, was sort of in the center, a part of the broader South Asian community at Stanford, which small and diverse, but very tight knit. And that same sort of microcosm I had while growing up was ever present.

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And I remember I had found sort of a sense of community there. But what always set me apart from a lot of the people who were a part of that was the Muslim background bit. So I remember having to field a lot of questions that I felt were stereotyping me in some way.

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I think I still see those types of stereotypes play out in the workplace and it's something at Stanford, I was surprised. People who are studying all kinds of things in university, still are viewing sort of Muslim culture through a particular lens. I did take a really cool class at Stanford, Islam in China.

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That was another way for me to just discover and rediscover my religion. So I also ended up interfacing with a lot of Muslims during Ramzan, so having an additional community. So almost like my childhood two spear life kind of coming back to life in a different setting, but at Stanford being a much more integrated sort of experience.

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And then my using that voice and whether it was like my experience writing for the Daily or I remember I joined this committee, the Acts of Intolerance Committee, because there were sort of. There was a lot of hate toward Muslims. So my starting to use my voice for, I would say those who are more disenfranchised and marginalized truly began in college.

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And I think that's what really set the stage for my wanting to go on and study policy immediately after Stanford. And last night I just to round it out, I heard this quote and it was, are you fighting for privilege or are you fighting for freedom by Alokman and that just struck me.

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And I feel I spent my childhood, my young years in school and my early career years fighting for freedom. I wanted to fight for freedom for those who are poor, those who are marginalized, those who come from the same background as my parents. And now just being in the jobs I've been in, living in the Silicon Valley.

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When I heard that last night and I looked at my life, I started wondering, wow, am I still fighting for freedom or am I fighting for privilege now? The same privilege that held me down in a certain way, am I becoming representative that. So, not to take too deep of a philosophical turn, would love to just hear from you a little bit, Sheba.

[00:55:38:190]

Sort of how your experiences have brought you to where you are today, and a bit more about what you're up to today and sort of your life after Stanford. So, my experience is growing up in Karachi. In middle-class Karachi it was very stark, the disparities between people who live in poverty Poverty and people who are in the middle class and people who are in sort of the more elite, affluent classes.

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There's just the disparity is so stark. It's not like in the United States where certainly it is visible here today, but a lot of people can just continue about their daily lives and not recognize it. In Pakistan growing up, I attended my aunt's school for primary school. It was called Meadow Primary School and I attended that until the fifth grade.

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And as a little girl, there was a famine in kind of one of the places in the country that's a desert called Thar Parker. And I remember being just so affected by it even as a child that I went door to door all by myself to help raise funds for the drought and for the famine that was happening.

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And so I could send the funds there. And I wore my school uniform just so I could look a little bit more credible. And I campaigned for that just door to door. And now that I think about it, I'm like, wow, as an adult, like you don't just show up at people's doors doing something like that.

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But as a child I didn't think about those constraints and actually I think I got into a little bit of trouble for wearing the school uniform without letting them know that I was doing this. But that, that sense of like, there are people in the country that are really suffering.

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There are people in the streets that are really suffering, led me to always be very inclined towards using my skills or whatever I had to be able to make a difference. Create some kind of positive social impact. Then after my primary school, I went to an all girl Catholic school, a Catholic convent called St Joseph's Convent.

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And we had these fantastic teachers who dedicated their lives to education. And by that I mean they never got married. They taught at the school for 30, 40, 50 years and they taught generations of Josephine's. And they taught us about the problems and pressing issues that are facing people in our society and all the kind of decisions that had been made by the powers that be that led to these sorts of things.

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And I remember just feeling so riled up and thinking, if I were Prime Minister, I could just set things right. I would make decisions this way and this way, not obviously being very naive and not understanding that that's not how things, things really work. But there was just that intent to alleviate a lot of the problems and contribute towards society and make things in Pakistan better.

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So that manifested when I came after Stanford, when I worked it actually manifested also at Stanford. But when after Stanford I had my first job at Yahoo after grad school and in 2005 there were these big earthquakes that hit Pakistan and caused a lot of devastation. And so I started to raise funds for that again and Yahoo had corporate matching and stuff like that.

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So I got a lot of donations from Yahoo employees. And I even after Yahoo, I was looking to merge social impact with technology and was trying to create a startup that would bridge the gap between younger and older people in terms of the digital divide. That lens then led me to pair social impact with technology because technology and user experience, that's what I had studied at Stanford, that's what I worked in at Yahoo.

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And I found this year long public service fellowship program called Code for America. Which is a nonprofit that's based in San Francisco that pairs technologists with government to try to improve public services. And make them human centered and make them really meet the needs of citizens. And it's that gap between government and citizens that the belief is that technology and human centered practices.

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And the way we have the ways of thinking and technical skills and design skills that we have as technologists that are not generally present in government. Can really help bring government services to meet people's needs in the way that we are used to in the 21st century. For example, if you look at in the private sector, we're used to things like Google Maps and mobile banking and we're used to services meeting our needs where we are.

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But when it comes to dealing with anything government, even in the United States, you still have to go stand in line at the DMV and basically write off half a day to do that. And so there's this notion that government is never going to be able to meet our needs in the way we are expect, we expect the private sector to, or we get used to.

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And that leads to things that hurt democracy, that leads to things that lead to, for example, Brexit or Trump being elected or whatever it is that comes out of a place of disillusionment with government. And so bridging that gap means both sides. It means both government being really open to doing things in a citizen centered way and to being agile and using design thinking and all these kinds of things.

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And it means citizens being more civically engaged and raising our hands to use technology. Because today we have access to everything is so many things are open source and we have access to doing more than just raising our voices to complain. We actually have access to using our skills to build solutions and you just have to bridge it from both sides.

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Otherwise it's just not a way to move forward smartly. Government currently around the world, many, many governments don't want to engage with citizens. Because they think that all citizens do is complain and all that the media is looking for is negative stories. And citizens don't want to engage with government because they think it's corrupt and bureaucratic and inefficient.

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And because of that, the divide just keeps getting wider and bigger. So I did this year long public service fellowship at Code for America. I didn't know anything about government, but I was, like I said, just looking to marry social impact with technology. And they had this year long fellowship program that they called the Peace Corps for Geeks.

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And I did that in 2012 and I learned so much. I was partnered with the city and county of Honolulu and we created a site called Honolulu Luansas that was open source and that actually invited citizens into co creating it. And it was revolutionary when it comes to government services because that's not how government services are created.

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And because it was open source, it went viral and it became Oakland Answers and it became Anchorage Answers and it became Durban Answers and it became Randomized Pakistan. And it just continued. And so for me, this year was a pivotal year. And this choice of doing this fellowship program at Code for America at a two thirds salary pay cut was absolutely what changed the course of my professional life going forward.

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So the following year I went back to Pakistan armed with everything that I had learned during my time as a Code for America fellow. And I had this vision because for so long I had been wanting to make things better in Pakistan, but I just didn't know how to.

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And so I would raise funds like I did as a child for Tharpa. And like I did for the earthquake. But here was something where I could actually use what I had learned and my skills and my experiences to help improve civic services and the way government functions.

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Because anything that you can imagine, kind of looking down upon or feeling dismayed by, with government services in the United States. You take that exponentially, a thousand X in Pakistan, because in order to get anything done. You either need to be privileged enough to have connections and contacts that will get it done for you in Pakistan through shortcuts and bypass the bureaucracy of government.

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Or if you are poor, then you suffer the most because you then have to take a whole day off of earning wages and go to the main town where there might be a government entity and be poorly treated. And change like five buses to get there and lose a day's worth of earnings and be told to come back.

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And your problem is just never solved. And it's heartbreaking. And so I went back to Pakistan with this vision of one where citizens and government work hand in hand to create a better future. But the big problem was in a society in particular like Pakistan, where trust between government and citizens was very low.

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How could that be done? What I did was, at Code for America, we followed the lean startup methodology. Which is basically this idea that before you sink a lot of investment and resources and time and effort and money into going and achieving your full vision and big idea you create the minimum viable prototype to test your hypothesis.

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And it truly is the minimum viable prototype. And so for me, in early 2013, which was a little more than a decade ago, I wanted to test the hypothesis to see if there was even interest amongst the citizen side in using their skills to help improve government. And I had zero budget, and I had already sort of depleted all my savings doing Code for America.

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But I was really fortunate with was that there was a lot of passion in Pakistan. And so, I teamed up with some new friends, the late social activists Sabine Mahmoud and Jahara, who was the president of the Pakistani Software Houses association at the time. And these remarkable ladies, they helped me.

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And Sabine opened up her space at T2F, which is the second floor, which is a cafe, co working space for free. And I had no budget, and so I just put out on social media a call for people to apply to participate in Pakistan's first civic hackathon in Karachi.

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Probably Pakistan's first hackathon, although there might have been one prior to that. But people didn't Know what hackathons were at the time. I just wanted to see if people would come together and be willing to use their skills. And this application form had nine serious essay questions because I wanted folks to know what they were coming in for and not just show up.

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Cause it was an interesting thing, but without having a sense of what it was for. And there were no winners, no prizes. And in six days, 111 people filled out that application form. And the space was small, so we allowed about, I don't know, 40 or 60 of them to come in.

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And I shared stories of applications that had been made at Code for America and how they really enabled people to use their skills to create a difference in their communities. This notion of civic hacking was the term that was used for that. Which is this idea that instead of waiting for somebody else to come and fix your problems, you try to do it yourself, because now, thanks to technology, we can.

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And so, there were all sorts of people who showed up that weekend. They were journalists and doctors and animal rights activists and, of course, technologists and designers. And they came with such passion for an enthusiasm for being able to use their skills to actually do something useful and meaningful.

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And there was one government department that came as well that it was clear that the hypothesis was checked, it was proven. And then the next step from there was for me to go to other cities. So from Karachi, I went to Lahore and Peshawar. And the hackathon got written up in Wired magazine, which was through a fortuitous series of events.

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And somebody from the World Bank, Anna O'Donnell, read that article and reached out and said, hey, I would like you to do this in Peshawar. I've just gotten mandate of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, known as KP for short, and I'd like you to do this in Peshawar. Now for context, the Northwest Frontier Province, as it was called formerly, now called the KP Province and Peshawar.

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That was at the time where the Taliban had the whole place under siege. There were bombs going off every other day. And that's the region, also that province is where Malala is from. And I had not thought about going there next. But when this opportunity came up, of course, I was going to seize it, despite my mom's fears and my family saying, are you out of your mind?

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And we did it. At that point, again, it was just me and a couple of other volunteers who were temporarily helping out with various things. And I ran the Lahore Civic Hackathon, and the following weekend, I ran the Peshawar Civic Hackathon. And it was a new government that had just been elected in the KP Province.

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And that government had this mandate of transparency and openness and governance and civic engagement. And all of those things that a civic tech organization like Code for Pakistan, which became an organization soon after that. And Code for America and Code for All, there's now a bigger network of all of these kinds of organizations really believe in.

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And so they had that mandate, but because it was a new government, they didn't know how to implement it just yet. And so we said, okay, I have probably as far as people in Pakistan go, I have some experience in this, having done Code for America. And so ran the Peshawar Civic Hackathon that was.

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And partnered with a university, held it there, had over 150 participants, and had a lot of government departments also participate and come and share pitch, so to speak, their problems. And that led to the birth of what we call the Civic Innovation Fellowship Program. Now it's called the KP Government Innovation Fellowship Program.

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And this fellowship program was, in its Its first year, 12 part time fellows who were in their final year of their studies partnered with four different government departments similar to code for America, trying to understand the needs of the government and the citizens in that jurisdiction. And then creating web and mobile applications, or solutions that improve the systems and help meet those needs.

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And from there we learned a ton the first couple of years and from there it grew to 20 full time fellows and it has now completed seven cycles of the fellowship program. And we've also launched a women's civic internship program. Because what our head of fellowships Anam actually realized was that while we had 25% of seats reserved for women.

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And this is again, this is the province, the Northwest frontier province where you don't see women very publicly. While we had reserved some of the 20 positions for women and we would receive 6,000 applications every year for these 20 positions. We were not seeing many qualified women applying and so we realized that the problem was further down in the pipeline.

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It was earlier I should say in the pipeline where essentially women just didn't have access to that kind of internship or work opportunity to hone their skills. They only learned what they learned in school and then often got married and then had to stay at home and raise the kids and cuz they weren't allowed outside the home.

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And so we created a remote women's civic internship program again in partnership with the World bank and the KP government, the KPIT board. In the first year it was nine women and we partnered with a telecommunications company to give them Internet devices cuz they were located all over the KP province, in certain places they didn't even have connectivity.

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And now it's in its second year with 50 women, it jumped from n9 to 50 women interns. It's a six month full time internship program, and I have been so amazed. And again we've given them devices and they're from places like Charsada and Swabi and places that you've never heard of and nothing has made me feel more fulfilled in a way to see them.

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I've held user experience sessions with them remotely over Google Meet and we have mentors that train them in a lot of these things. And they work on solutions for government so that they actually get practice honing their skills. And from there on hopefully they can go on to get jobs and also become civically engaged and maybe even some of them will join government or what have you.

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But if you just enable access in a remote way and in ways that work for these women, they are so smart and I was bowled away. I was talking about meaty concepts with them and thinking deeply about product strategy and user experience, which is stuff that I would do in my day job.

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Because for the last ten years with code for Pakistan, I've been a volunteer, even though I've invested more time than I would even at a day job. But that's the problem, which is that we have one small grant, we're super grateful for the grant, but it pays for salaries in Pakistan and not in the United States, which is where I live in San Diego.

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But we've been so, so grateful for what that grant has allowed us to do. We now have a full time team of employees in Pakistan, in Islamabad and in Peshawar, and there's about 15 people and another like half a dozen highly engaged core volunteers, myself included. I'm the chairman of the board as well.

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And so what's been really fascinating and remarkable to see is through our civic Innovation labs, which are community groups of volunteers, it's that there is so much that one can do. Most of us think, what can I do if it's not my full time job? And that's what I've learned through this whole ten years, that you don't need for something to be your full time job in order to make a massive difference in other people's lives.

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And you just have to provide a platform where others can be engaged and then they can help serve the community and they can help other people. It's really just a matter of raising your hand and being willing to say I can do something here and then that kickstarts and enables a lot of people.

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What I love most is the stories of people whose lives have changed. For example, when I did the Lahore Civic hackathon in January 2014, there was this young woman who worked at this company called Arbisoft and her name was Madiha and she was from actually a small village in the Punjab province.

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And when she had applied to participate in the hackathon, she didn't at that time understand civic tech and what that meant and what this world meant. And so with her application she had applied with this idea of doing an inter company sports competition. And when she came to the actual hackathon, we accepted her because she was very bright.

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When she came to the actual hackathon I shared what civic technology was, I shared examples and all of that and then she really understood. She got it and so she was like, okay that the intercompany sports competition thing doesn't quite work. So then she pitched this idea of a ride sharing carpooling application solution.

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Not just an application, obviously, there's a whole process behind it that's very human. And in Pakistan, for something like that to work one, if it could work, it would be hugely beneficial to people, right? But there's so many restrictions and lack of trust and security and all of this kind of stuff that were blockers that she was proposing to address.

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Now in the hackathon, I had said that teams needed to be of size three to five people. She had pitched this idea and one person had joined her while teams were forming, I saw her looking very despondent with this one other person because they only had two people and so she couldn't form a team.

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And then this person from another team that was looking at blood donations, that already had a team of five. And so that person sort of felt bad for her and said, okay, I'll go join your team cuz I think your idea has some good legs and I wanna see it happen.

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So then they formed a team of three. She created Sawari, this carpooling ride sharing idea, and it was just a concept and an idea during the hackathon and they won the audience favorite. And she went on to work on it full time, supported by her employer at Arbisoft, to continue working on it and providing mentorship and all that.

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It got acquired eventually by Careem, which is basically like Uber in the Middle east and Pakistan. It's a huge service, and so with that she moved to Dubai and then Karim merged with Uber or got acquired by Uber, and she moved to Berlin. And her entire life trajectory, and she's working as a product manager.

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She was a graphic designer earlier, back when she had participated in the hackathon. But her entire life trajectory has completely changed, and I imagine of her next generation as well, once she has children and all of that because she was from this little village in Pakistan and now here she is living in Berlin and working with top companies.

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And so, and I don't know, I'm sure she would have found her way somehow, these things might have happened. But certainly I think just all of these series of events and participating in the hackathon catalyzed it and helped it to happen. So it's those life stories of people that are also very, very heartening.

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And so today, to go back to your question about what am I doing today? Today I work a lot, I continue to work a lot on code for Pakistan and we have a lot of great ideas for things that we want to do. We've recognized that a lot of the limitation is in just sort of training and so the kind of learning and experience that people have both in government and outside of government.

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And so we're starting to focus on that as well, obviously working on digital services, working on the community engagement piece. Right now, Pakistan is in a very bad spot from all kinds of different sides and angles. And so whatever contribution that I can continue to make is it feels worthwhile.

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And then I also, by day, typically work in user experience and lead teams. And it's interesting because I just actually submitted a paper to a journal along with a professor in Chile and a professor in Brazil about this notion of everything that we knew as user experience. Which is the notion of human centered design, to actually be shifting a little bit when you think about community centered design, because it really needs to be community driven design.

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It needs to be designers not acting as colonists, but actually acting as facilitators because the community actually knows its problems the best and oftentimes has the best solutions to its problems too. It just needs facilitation to be able to access resources and to see the whole picture. And so the way the user experience world is also turning and changing, it's really interesting that these two worlds of mine that I thought were very different, the civic tech world and what I do for my day job.

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But they are actually merging in ways that ultimately you realize that it's never about the technology. It's always about the process. It's always about the way in which we try to solve problems and create solutions and make things better for people. And so, yeah, I think that everything that from being that child raising money for the survivors of the drought in Tadpakar to even work, the things that I learned at all of these experiences at Yahoo, at LinkedIn, wherever I worked, and at Stanford, certainly the intellect, kind of the critical thinking that was really pushed at Stanford had a huge part to play in it.

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This culture of achievement from Stanford, this culture of nothing is impossible. This was a huge thing because the people who lived across the dorm from me were highly published in journals before they even came to Stanford, or very accomplished musician or whatever. This notion that it is just ordinary people who just dedicate themselves to doing something, and that's what it is.

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It's just dedication, nothing is impossible that contributed also very greatly to the work that I did with Code for Pakistan, which had I thought about all the what ifs, I don't think that I would have done it. And certainly it was not easy, I think being the sole founder of anything is if I had to do it again, I would not do that.

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It was pretty hard the first year and a half maintaining a job here and trying to run that remotely and not having a grant, so just having a team of volunteers. But I'm very, very grateful also to technology, to things like Zoom and Google Meet and whatnot, and WhatsApp that allow things to work remotely.

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And so I really do think that there's this quote from Jane Jacobs, who once said, cities have the capability of providing something for everybody only because and only when they are created by everybody. And I truly believe that, I think that each and every one of us has such a role to play in the experiences of our daily lives that not just ourselves, but our community members, our friends, our neighbors, and others that we don't even know have the experience that they can have.

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But I encourage everybody to use their skills as volunteers, as side projects, or as your day job to see where it is that you can move the needle forward for society.